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## Impact of deservingness on schadenfreude and sympathy: Further evidence

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## Replications and Refinements

Under this heading are brief reports of studies providing data that substantiate, challenge, or refine what we think we know. These notes consist of a summary of the study's procedure and as many details about the results as space allows. Additional details concerning the results can be obtained by communicating directly with the author. Submissions to this section must provide a meaningful conceptual replication that extends the construct validity of the work.

### The Impact of Deservingness on Schadenfreude and Sympathy: Further Evidence

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**ABSTRACT.** The authors tested the hypothesis that people experience less schadenfreude and more sympathy toward high achievers with deserved achievements who suffer misfortunes as opposed to those with undeserved achievements. The results support the hypothesis and show that this effect is mediated by the perceived deservingness of the misfortune.

**Keywords:** deservingness, emotion, schadenfreude, sympathy

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WHEN PEOPLE LEARN OF THE ADVERSITIES of high achievers, they usually find it hard to resist a little smile; this pleasure derived from another's misfortune is referred to by the German word *schadenfreude*. Research on schadenfreude has shown this malicious joy to be evoked by the downfall of high achievers, especially when they are envied or resented (Feather & Sherman, 2002;

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Smith et al., 1996; Van Dijk, Ouwerkerk, Goslinga, Nieweg, & Gallucci, 2006). But are high achievers always an easy prey for *schadenfreude*, or are there circumstances that mitigate this emotion when they fall from grace? Previous research has indicated that *schadenfreude* is attenuated when a misfortune is perceived as undeserved (Feather, 1994; Van Dijk, Goslinga, & Ouwerkerk, 2008; Van Dijk, Ouwerkerk, Goslinga, & Nieweg, 2005). According to Feather (2006), people's beliefs about deservingness depend on how they appraise the evaluative structure of action and outcome relations. More specifically, misfortunes following positively valued actions (e.g., working hard) are appraised by individuals as undeserved, and misfortunes evoke sympathy; however, misfortunes following negatively valued actions (e.g., not working hard) are appraised as deserved, and these evoke *schadenfreude*. In line with this reasoning, we hypothesized that people experience less *schadenfreude* and more sympathy toward high achievers who deserve their achievements but experience misfortunes than they do toward high achievers who do not deserve their achievements. Moreover, we expected that this effect would be mediated by the perceived deservingness of the subsequent misfortune.

Participants (52 women, 40 men;  $M$  age = 21.33 years,  $SD$  = 3.36 years) read an interview with a high-achieving student. In this interview, we manipulated details to make the student's achievements appear either deserved or undeserved. Subsequently, we provided participants with information about a recent misfortune suffered by the student. Participants rated the following on 7-point Likert-type scales ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very much*): (a) deservingness of achievements (3 items;  $\alpha$  = .93), (b) *schadenfreude* (5 items;  $\alpha$  = .90), (c) sympathy (3 items;  $\alpha$  = .82), and (d) deservingness of misfortune (4 items,  $\alpha$  = .91). As hypothesized, results show that participants experienced less *schadenfreude* toward a student with deserved achievements ( $M$  = 2.43,  $SD$  = 1.16) than toward an individual with undeserved achievements ( $M$  = 3.11,  $SD$  = 1.33),  $F(1, 84) = 6.18, p < .05$ . However, participants experienced more sympathy toward a student with deserved achievements ( $M$  = 4.49,  $SD$  = 1.00) than they felt toward a student with undeserved achievements ( $M$  = 3.93,  $SD$  = 1.32),  $F(1, 84) = 5.89, p < .05$ . Mediation analyses showed that the effect of perceived deservingness of achievements on *schadenfreude* was fully mediated by the perceived deservingness of the subsequent misfortune ( $Z = -2.70, p < .01$ ). The mediated pathway was marginally significant for sympathy ( $Z = 1.76, p < .10$ ). These findings indicate that people's emotional reactions toward the downfalls of high achievers are more benign when they perceive those initial achievements as being deserved. Moreover, these findings provide further evidence for the effect of perceived deservingness on *schadenfreude* and sympathy toward other people who suffer misfortunes.

#### AUTHOR NOTES

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